



# THE LAST PLUNGE

By John Kemble

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AY! Do you know what you are? A piker! Any guy that lets a sleeper like this one go to the post with him only backing it to the tune of a two-spot ought to be ruled off the track for life by the Jockey Club. And I'm giving it to you straight; why, this is the candy, the real thing, none of your paper bag kind, but the best, done up in gold string, and it's been dodging the sun-shine for weeks. Oh, I know what I'm talking about. I'm not telling who gave it to me, but I've got it all right and it's bound to go through. There's nothing to it; she'll be under blankets all the way and stroll in.

What's her price now? Fifteen to one! It's stealing the money—you ought to go to the vacation house for taking it. But be a piker if it's in your blood, only don't come around and open your guns on me when it's all over and the wise ones are cashing.

I knew a fellow once who had a nerve for you: there wasn't an ounce of shy boy to him—he'd have given Pittsburg Phil a run for his coin if he'd have stuck to the game, but he ran up against a love affair, got stuck on a nice girl, and Love and the Girl made the sort of a favorite that makes a show of the field from start to finish. He's out West somewhere now, I believe, making money by the barrel—you couldn't stop him.

Following the horses? Naw! He don't have to; one plunge cured him. I'll tell you about it. Oh, there's plenty of time; they ain't weighing in yet.

It all come about like this:—I was riding myself when I first met him, riding for Taylor, the meanest old sneak that ever owned a filly, and things were coming my way hot and heavy. 'Twas just after my bringing Sorrel Top in in the Brooklyn and my head was so big I couldn't see my feet. These jocks today are all right, but we old boys could teach 'em a trick or two if we had a mind. Every one was wise in those days; that is, every one thought they was wise, and it was twice as easy to string 'em once you got 'em started. Taylor used to pull something off every month, and they never tumbled to him until he was a bloated bondholder, and then he told 'em to go to the devil. I could tell you some pretty tales about his stable that would make you open your eyes, but that ain't the text to-day.

Well, as I was saying, it was just after the Brooklyn that I met him. Burns was his name, Fletcher Burns. Nice name, ain't it? And he was just as clean cut as his name; a quiet, tall, slender chap with a pair of blue eyes that made you look twice before you were sure they wasn't steel. I was rolling around in champagne corks at the time, trying to imagine that my father was a banker instead of a bum trainer. Some one introduced him to me at the hotel one night when I was up to my neck in fizz and sparring for wind at that. I had never seen him around the track; in fact, I don't believe he knew the difference between the grand stand and the paddock before he bumped into me. Well, anyway, my tongue was pretty loose, and we struck up a conversation right away on the ponies, and before I had a chance to pull myself up he had got my opinions on half the top-notchers running. He did it all so quiet like; said he was a writer and wanted to do a race track story. I didn't think he was pumping me till he had me dry—then I shut up, but it was too late. My head was pretty big, anyway, and those champagne corks hadn't made it any smaller. So the result of the whole thing was I gave him a hot tip for the next day that had been under cover for a month.

## Case of Cold Feet.

Now, I'm not much of a gasser, even when I am tanked with booze, but this fellow had me going. I was swerving all over the track, and if the thing had ever got out I should have found myself on the ground for life as far as the Eastern club went. It was one of Taylor's fancy stunts, and I blew the whole thing. The minute I got it off my chest I got cold feet and began to rubber for a stove, but he looked as unconcerned as could be and changed the subject. That settled it, though; I could see the whole thing going to smash, and once the tip got abroad the bookies would have us by the bit and the sleeper would wake up with a bang. Taylor would know who it came from, for I was to ride and not another living soul was in on the deal.

I never lost a jag quicker than I ducked that one, you can bet your life I was sober by the time I got home. Well, to make a long story short, Burns never opened his lip. He just hustled out to the track the next day all by his lonesome and got down with three months' salary. He and Taylor were the only ones that cashed, I guess, for old Taylor wouldn't have let his starving mother in on the best thing ever, and I'm blamed sure I was a dumb one from that out.

So you see I took a fancy to him right away, for there isn't one man in a thousand who's got sense enough to keep in the dark with a swell chance when he's onto a sure thing and people are buying information. From that time on we were chums.

Yes, it was a funny combination, for he was a studious sort and I never opened a book in my life unless I had to, and then I generally shut it up without getting a notion of what was inside of it. But we stuck together like glue, and ran double as though we had been matched for it.

He wrote his book and I was a real hero in it. Didn't you ever read it? Say! Where do you come from, anyway? Well, it wasn't long after that I broke with Taylor. Burns had been talking confidence and honesty to me, and one day I refused to

pull old Flirt, who went to the post heavily backed by the public, and won by half a length, downing two of the richest bookmakers that ever tried to fix a race. That settled me with Taylor, but I wasn't sorry, for if I had stuck to him I would have gone under sooner or later. But Burns and I between us managed to rake in a neat little sum and bank it. Mine would never have seen the safe joint if it hadn't been for him, but he had me so I was fast becoming a miser when the break came, and—I began to go to the devil.

Of course it was a girl. Did you ever see a couple of pals break harness that a petticoat didn't do it? Rivals?—naw! You never saw a stake horse running with a selling plater, did you? Then don't ask fool questions.

I wasn't in his class when it came to women. The only kind I could ever jolly or make any kind of a bit with generally had paint on their cheeks and a wet appetite.

But she was a beaut, one of your real bluebloods, with educated ways and big brown eyes that made you kind of homesick for a warm summer day in the country. I couldn't blame him a bit for falling for her; she was all to the mustard, and had the rest of her class under the whip to keep her in sight. That was the worst of it—I knew I was losing him, and yet I couldn't pick a flaw in her.

He began to fight shy of the track, and it got so that I only saw him about once a week, when he'd run out of a Saturday, but then he wouldn't make a bet once in a dog's age.

I was wise to the girl's trying to reform him (as though a fellow like him needed reforming), but some people have funny ideas on gambling and you and I look pretty wicked to 'em, I guess.

## The Inside Tip.

One Saturday morning he pulled me out of bed about eight o'clock, and I could see at once by the look on his face that something unusual was up. He was quiet as a mouse (the never was anything else) but there was a couple of lines about his mouth that I had never seen before, and they gave me a start. He told me the whole story while I was dressing. It seems the girl had said she would marry him, but he had promised her never to lay another bet as long as he lived after the next day. I didn't open my yap, though you can bet your sweet life I did some tall thinking, but after all he was too good a sort to spend his life with the horses, and I had known it all along; the idea hadn't tickled me, but I had it all right.

I let him go on to the end without a word—to tell the truth, I tried to say something once, but my throat got kind of dry all of a sudden and I only choked. I can hear him now.

"As it stands, Charley, I have about five thousand dollars in the bank, thanks to your tips and friendship, for I can't say that my literary work has panned out very well financially—and what's that to marry on? Why, nothing, when you're going to get the dearest little girl that God ever breathed the breath of life into!"

There was his very words. I remembered them, for I thought I might fall in love myself some day and they might come in handy.

"She's had everything she wanted from the time of her birth," says he, "and it ain't right for me to marry her and pull her down into any vale of economy." He was a bit of a poet, was Burns! "It ain't right, Charley, and I ain't going to do it. That's why I've come to talk things over with you." He settled back in the chair and looked at me with a touch of the old steely glint in his eyes.

I didn't know what he was driving at, so what could I say? Nothing! I just looked wise and waited for him to go on.

"To-day," says he, finally, "to-day something has got to be done."

"In—in the betting line?" says I.

"Exactly," says he, and he sat bolt upright. "To-day we have got to plunge."

"Not with part of your five thousand?" says I.

"With all of it!" says he, and I gave a gasp and sat down on the bed.

"Then what about getting married if you lose?" He began to look too desperate to suit me.

"I shan't get married yet awhile, that's all, and I'm not going to get married on a paltry five thousand anyway, whether I break it or no—so no more of that. I may be a blamed coward," says he, "and it is hard to wait, but I'm not going to bring her in to share my uncertainty. It's either a case of win or lose, and as the matter stands now I have already lost."

He fell silent for a moment, and I just sat and stared at him as though I had lost my wife.

"Think of it!" says he, after a bit. "Well, of all girls in the world, forced to endure poverty, perhaps—for a little money soon melts away—brought into touch with the squalid, hard side of life, and all through me." He got up and began to pace the floor. "Thank God I'm not that kind of a man!" And that was the end of it; he never mentioned her name again until the thing was all over. For the last time we two put our heads together over the horses that morning. The fields were larger than usual for the day and there were seven events—one on the turf, five on the flat and one steeplechase.

"What do you think?" says he, as I chuckled the entry sheet away and moved over to the window.

## Looking 'Em Over.

"Not a damned thing!" says I. "It's the worst day of the meet."

"All the more reason, my dear boy," says he, "that we should pick carefully and not throw the entries away before we have looked them well over."

Oh, you couldn't put him off once he had made up his mind, and I knew by the way he picked up the sheet that he had done it for fair this time, so I came back and glanced over his shoulder.

I was down for two mounts myself, but they would be "also rans" before they got the flag, and I knew it. It hurt me to think that so far as my riding went I couldn't help him. My eye went down the sheet. I jumped the maiden race, cut the steeplechase, and only came to a halt at the fourth. Here Terrible stood out as far and away the class, but he was sure to be a hot favorite, and it was easy guessing that he would be odds on. Up and down my eye went, back and forth—I must have looked those damned entries over twenty times before a name struck me, and then all at once a tip of the night before popped into my mind.

At the time I hadn't been able to see it; in fact, I gave the whole thing the ha-ha when it came to my ears, but some way that morning it didn't look so wild.

The race was for a mile, and there were twelve starters. Clyde would be a favorite; the public would certainly pick him after his fine showing in the handicap, and the bookmakers would round Flora G. and Lamplighter into being the contenders; that left nine to swallow the dust and limp in behind, but the more I looked and the more I thought the less I cared for Clyde. He was a big, heavy stallion, and I was inclined to believe that the handicap had hurt rather than improved him. To be sure, the field he had to beat was only a fair one, but, call it a hunch or not as you will, the only horse I could see was The Hebrew!

Now, they say I look like a Jew. You notice it, do you? Well, I'm not one, though I wish I was, for I

might have clung on to my money if I had been. But hunch or no hunch, Jew or no Jew, I began to get stuck on The Hebrew, and the more I thought the more stuck I got.

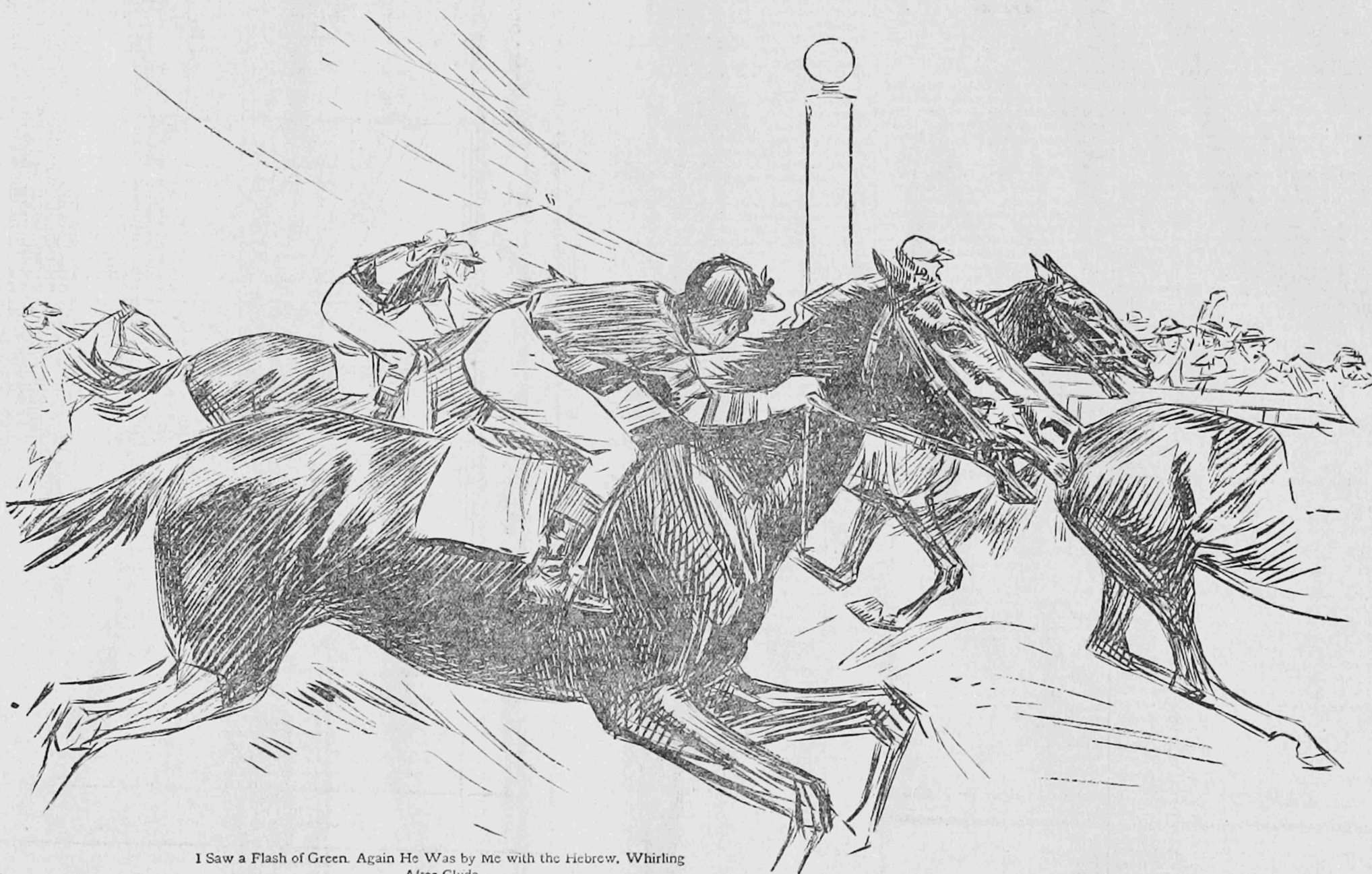
"Hebrew, Hebrew, Hebrew!"

It rang in my ears and I turned around half expecting Burns to repeat it too.

"You look excited," he says. "Have you struck something?"

had got away last. The pace was certainly a hot one, for Clyde was making it, and I could see his muscles quivering as he settled down into his well known stride. If he kept it up there was simply nothing to it, for no horse in America had a surer clip, and Frost was holding him well in hand as he swung out of the chute.

The dust was blinding, there was a thunder of hoofs behind me, growing louder every moment, and



I Saw a Flash of Green. Again He Was by Me with the Hebrew, Whirling After Clyde

At first I didn't know whether I'd give it to him or not; if he should take it and lose, would I ever forgive myself? And yet—it wasn't wholly a hunch, for The Hebrew was the tip of the night before, the tip that I hadn't been able to laugh down in the man who gave it to me.

Well, the upshot of the whole thing was that he plunged on The Hebrew. Three of his five thousand he sent to the poolrooms and the other two we took to the track. I had clean forgotten my excitement of the business. It wasn't the money that hit me. It was the idea of the game and the picture of that girl with her big brown eyes and sweet voice. (I could have made poetry over her myself.)

The day was great, not a cloud—and the track was perfect. You know what the Park track is when it's good? Well, this was better still, and I knew that Clyde would have preferred it heavy. I nearly broke my neck going to the post with my first mount and the starter cursed me from where he stood to Christmas, but he might just as well have been in Chicago for all I heard him. You couldn't have chopped The Hebrew out of my head with an axe.

I was making long guesses as to his opening price when the wire went up and I got away last. But never mind, I was on a dead one anyway.

## In a Hurry.

I was cooling off in the jockey room when I heard young Miles reading the list in the bunkers. Say! I nearly came a cropper over a chair when he read, "The Hebrew, 30 to 1!" I jumped into my colors and flew down into the paddock. I had just four minutes before weighing in and the place was jammed, so I had to pick my way foot by foot. I had about one chance in a thousand of finding Burns, but I knew he would come around to post me as soon as he could. The band was playing 'way up in the big stand; it's funny, but I've never forgotten that tune, and I'll bet I have hummed it over a million times since.

It goes like this . . . You know it, do you? Well, to get back to my story. I was on the point of giving him up and getting over to my mount when he hove in sight. Cool as a cucumber, he just gave me a nod as much as to say, "It's all down," and moved over to the fence. The last I saw of him he was lighting a cigarette and holding the match for the man next to him to get a light. And I'll bet his hand never trembled! Talk about nerve! All the cash he had in the world, the chance of marrying the girl he loved, staked on a 30 to 1 shot that would never have gone to the post at such a price if one of the bookmakers had dreamed that it had half a chance to win.

A minute later we were all filling out before the stand, and what a hand they gave Clyde. He certainly looked fit, and Frost, who had the leg up, was the one boy who knew how to ride him. I came dragging along fourth, three behind on Regent, a passable nag in his day, but an out and out "has-been." The Hebrew was on my flank, and I confess I did not like his appearance. So far as I could determine he was apt to come up short, for he was in a lather from end to end, and Hill, who had the mount, was as nervous as a colt. I would have given a good sized purse to have changed with him, but—I might not have done any better.

There must have been fifteen thousand people out that day, and all I saw as we swept back to the starting post was a confused mass of color hedging in a sea of faces as white as a bunch of ghosts. I thought we would never get away, and as luck would have it my mount made all the trouble. He seemed to have recovered his lost youth, for he cavorted in and out like a yearling. At last, however, I got his head straight and we were off.

I lost sight of The Hebrew in the mix-up that followed, though something seemed to tell me that he

I found myself running second at the quarter, a clean length between Clyde and The Regent. The distance was narrowing gradually with every plunge. It could not be possible that The Regent was back in his old form once more. I had never for a second looked upon him as a dangerous factor, and yet here he was showing his heels to the field and closing in on the favorite!

I glanced back over my shoulder—they were all running wide—and I caught a fleeting glimpse of Hill's green jacket away back in the rear, doing his best to keep The Hebrew from being hopelessly pocketed. There was nothing for me to do but fight it out, and I suddenly occurred to me that if I could only push Clyde a little harder I might weaken him for the final drive. No sooner thought than done, for The Regent was fighting for his head, and as soon as I gave it to him he made a desperate challenge for the lead.

## By a Nose.

I was now a bare quarter length away, and I saw Frost turn a swift look in my direction and then set the forward to increase the pace. The fence leapt by, and inch by inch I crept in on the leader. In vain did the valiant Clyde knuckle down to his task, for The Regent had found himself, and if I could only manage to hold him to it for another furlong it would be neck and neck.

The three-quarter post went by like an express train, and I was leaning so far forward that I had no difficulty in hearing Clyde's labored breathing as he tried in vain to stall me off. Deeper and deeper it came, his tanks covered with foam, and still The Regent clung to his side and crawled up until his nose was even with Frost's saddle. It was terrible, and I knew it couldn't last, and yet we swung into the stretch neck to neck.

Far ahead I could hear the muffled roar of the grand stand as they jumped to their feet and howled for the favorite. It seemed like a thunderstorm dropping down on a city. Once more I ventured a glance over my shoulder—we were in a cloud of dust and it nearly blinded me, but there at my back I did get a snatch of green blurring before my eyes, and I knew that Hill was doing his best and that The Hebrew was running a safe third.

Frost was losing his head. It was hard to believe a seasoned jockey like him would get a touch of the nerves, but he had 'em all right, for his whip came out, and he let Clyde have it—once, twice, thrice—and no sooner had he felt the last than he swerved, stung to madness by the taunt when it was plain to see that he was doing his best—swerved clear across the track. I had to pull up to one side in the twinkling of an eye or we would have collided; as it was, Frost was nearly unseated, and I had a narrow squeak for it, but it was Hill's chance, and he took it.

I saw a flash of green again and he was by me with The Hebrew whirling after Clyde, his ears forward, his heels clicking like clockwork. We were up to the stand, and every other sound was drowned in the mad cheers that closed in on us. It was too late to look up, but I knew from the muttered roar all around me that the finish was going to be close, and I only shut my eyes and prayed that The Hebrew would do it.

I'm not religious—you don't get much chance to be in this game—but, you know, I had a sort of vision of a brown eyed girl, and—well, the prayer just came natural like, that's all.

It was all over in a second, but the only thing I could have known about the finish was that The Regent had run a damned fine race and come in an easy third if a sudden groan from the stand hadn't told me that the favorite had been beaten. That groan beat all the music I ever heard, and I have heard some blamed good tunes in my day.

Did The Hebrew win? Sure! By a nose! Come on! It's too late to raise your bet—they're at the post Piker!